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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000053

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SUBJECT: TO THE MAT: CHAVEZ TAKES ON INSULZA AND CHURCH
OVER RCTV

REF: CARACAS 15

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Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY In a blustery January 8 address to commemorate the swearing-in of his new cabinet (septel), President Chavez again declared that the non-renewal of RCTV's broadcast license was "irreversible." Chavez lashed out at two actors who urged reconsideration of the RCTV decision, OAS Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza and the Church, churlishly insulting Insulza and calling for his resignation, and telling the Church to mind its own business. Chavez's new Vice President, Jorge Rodriguez, similarly endorsed the impending closure of RCTV in his first address in his new position. Chavez's decision continues to meet with vocal and vehement opposition, with the OAS and the Church only the loudest of many detractors. RCTV executive Marcel Granier took his case to the public on January 9, giving an interview in El Universal in which he remained defiant and indicated a legal counterattack. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) President Chavez's January 8 speech delineated his plan to further consolidate his "Socialist Revolution" (septel). Chavez continued his fiery rhetoric toward Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), insisting that his decision not to renew the opposition-aligned privately-owned television station's broadcasting license is irreversible. Chavez said "no individual nor entity" will prevent the inevitable. RCTV is the oldest operating television channel in Venezuela and has been a thorn in Chavez's side since silently allying against Chavez during the short-lived April 2002 coup. President Chavez first targeted opposition media outlets during last year's presidential campaign, and recently honed in on RCTV individually (reftel).

¶3. (U) Chavez's newly sworn in Vice President Jorge Rodriguez quickly backed the party line. In his first speech as Vice President, Rodriguez disputed that the BRV was violating freedom of expression. He reiterated that the government was not revoking anybody's license, nor closing any channel; RCTV's license was simply expiring. Rodriguez added that the airwaves belong to the people, and that they shall be administered by the government elected by the people. Setting the tone for his administration with respect to media relations, Rodriguez said to the cabinet that the more the media insults and slanders you, the better you are

doing your job.

BATTLE ROYALE: BRV VS. OAS; CHAVEZ VS. INSULZA

¶4. (U) On January 5, OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza called on the BRV to reconsider its decision to shutter RCTV. Insulza indicated that the closure of such a major media outlet is unprecedented in the last several decades in the democratic world and warned of the political repercussions of such a decision. He also said that if RCTV had violated a law, and the government had a legal case against the media outlet, it should pursue its grievance through the country's judicial system. Insulza regretted that Chavez's decision goes against the spirit of dialogue initiated when the opposition recognized Chavez's electoral victory on December 3. Finally, Insulza called on other media outlets not to be cowed into silence and to continue exercising its right and duty to inform the people in a free, truthful, and objective manner.

¶5. (U) Chavez clearly took Insulza's comments personally and responded with personal, juvenile attacks in return. Chavez called on Insulza to resign his position as Secretary General of the OAS, suggesting that after such an intervention in the domestic affairs of a country, Insulza lacked the moral fiber to lead the organization. Chavez interpreted Insulza's comment regarding "political repercussions" as a threat to his country and called Insulza a "pendejo" - a term that can be loosely translated as "idiot," but is in fact much more vulgar. Chavez continually played on words with Insulza's name, connecting it to the Spanish word "insulso," which translates to "insipid" or "tasteless." Finally, Chavez said "don't mess with us," and indicated he would object to the OAS's interference and lack

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of respect in all forthcoming OAS meetings and would "put him (Insulza) in his place." Chavez added he would confront Insulza on January 10 at the swearing-in of new Nicaraguan President Ortega.

CHAVEZ TO THE CHURCH: MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS

¶6. (U) Chavez saved no kind words for the Church and the position it has taken on RCTV. Referring to Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino's and the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference's (CEV) calls on Chavez to reconsider his decision, Chavez called on the Church to "mind its place." Saying "to the shoemaker goes the shoe," Chavez exhorted the Church to address only issues of the Church and not to make public statements outside its bailiwick. Monsignor Ovidio Perez, permanent member of the CEV's Secretariat and President of the CEV's Plenary Council, responded to Chavez's comments, saying that the Church would continue to defend reconciliation and peace instead of exclusion and disunity. Perez said it is outside the scope of political power to dictate which direction the Church will or will not take. He also said that the media is "penetrated and dominated" by the BRV and "intends to eliminate" the few objective voices that remain.

OTHERS FROM THE OPPOSITION

¶7. (U) Manuel Rosales called January 5 on the government to reconsider its decision not to renew RCTV's broadcasting license. Rosales indicated that Chavez's decision "intends to silence sectors of dissent" and seriously undermines democracy in Venezuela. Rosales views Chavez's decision as a violation of the Constitution and as a "gigantic step" towards limiting participation and the discussion of ideas.

Rosales said that while he respects the President's right to express his views, he asks that Chavez's decisions be legally sound.

18. (C) Opposition party COPEI has made no secret of its position on the RCTV issue. Antonio Sotillo Luna, a member of COPEI's National Political Committee, said "the government is committing a crime against the freedom of thought, against the freedom of opinion, against the freedom of information, and against the freedom of expression." Another leading party member, Roberto Enriquez, indicated January 8 that COPEI will present the case to the international organizations Christian Democrat International (IDC) and the Christian Democratic Organization of America (ODCA). COPEI Secretary General Luis Ignacio Planas told PolCouns and

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PolOff January 8 that the RCTV issue and pending legislation on educational reform will be the top two issues the opposition will point to in 2007 to demonstrate Chavez's authoritarian grip on Venezuela.

19. (U) Antonio Ledezma, leader of the tiny, radical opposition political party Alianza Bravo Pueblo, called January 8 on the Venezuelan people to express its displeasure with the government's decision regarding RCTV. He called for street protests for the coming weekend (January 13-14) and indicated that a popular assembly was planned for January 13 and a "caravan" march for January 14. Ledezma also proposed to political, civil, and cultural leaders to mobilize in support of freedom of expression for the annual January 23 commemoration. Like COPEI, Ledezma also criticized pending legislation on education reform.

GRANIER INTERVIEW

10. (U) RCTV chief executive and President of 1BC Enterprises, Marcel Granier, reiterated in a January 9 interview with El Universal his argument that RCTV's license does not expire until 2022. When asked about the government's position that the license expires this year, Granier indicated that this is the same government that said it was going to address the insecurity problems, get children off the streets, and resolve the penal problems. "Lies, lies and more lies," said Granier. Granier indicated that RCTV

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has received no official notification that its license will not be renewed; to the contrary, said Granier, the government is engaging in a defamation campaign against RCTV. As the government has done with many critical journalists in the past, Granier indicated RCTV is going to take legal action against Information Minister William Lara for committing the crime of slander and impugning the honor and reputation of thousands of RCTV workers.

COMMENT

11. (C) President Chavez's hostile, personal, and very public stance towards RCTV indicates that this issue permeates beyond Venezuela and freedom of expression. This is a long-held grudge match between Hugo Chavez and Radio Caracas Television. RCTV is the sole remaining free-to-air broadcaster to maintain a ferocious resistance to the Chavez regime. As such, it has a broad audience. Other free-to-air broadcasters have toned down their criticisms over the last four years, and the equally staunchly pro-opposition Globovision is available on cable only (but by no means immune). Granier's threat of legal action against the government is an interesting role reversal but success on that front presumes a fair and impartial hearing - something not likely to occur.

¶12. (C) Reminiscent of the President Chavez who called President Bush the devil at the UN General Assembly in September of last year, Chavez once again has engaged in outrageous, vulgar personal attacks and unstatesmanlike rhetoric. The vehemence with which Chavez has pursued the RCTV issue, while incomprehensible to those who think logically given his electoral margin of victory, is typical Chavez behavior when he sets his sights on a potential victim and is not likely to stop until RCTV is history. That said, recognizing its limited room to maneuver and likely BRV attempts to further restrict civil liberties this year, the opposition and Church leaderships will try to make RCTV's closure as politically costly as possible to this government and its international reputation.

WHITAKER